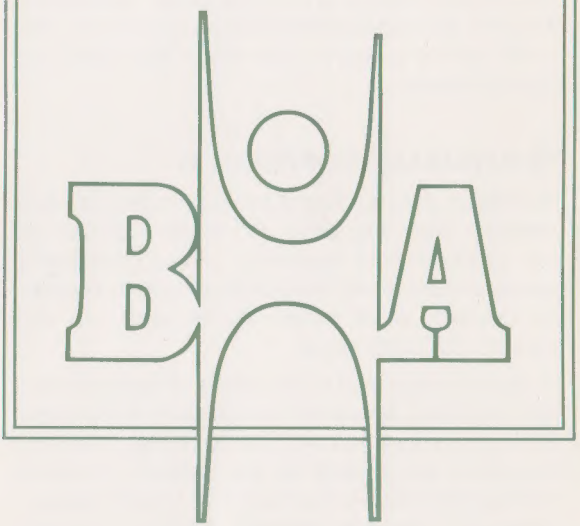
PRINCIPLES OF HUMANISM



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PRINCIPLES OF HUMANISM

Humanism is the outlook of goodwill and reason, for those who do not accept "God", or a "Divine Plan".

"Humanism" is an approach to the way that life can be lived to the full, and to the way its problems can be solved. It is a framework for answers to the ultimate questions of life. It is a basis for moral judgements.

Humanists are cautiously optimistic. We believe that people can learn to understand each other, and work together, whatever their culture, wherever their origins. Problems are solved by people together, relying on their shared understanding, and creativity. We see fulfilment being found in this cooperation and endeavour. We know of no after-life, nor supernatural order.

This leaflet tries to say a little about Humanism. You will see that Humanists have a job to do. The world will be a better place when Humanism has more influence.

THE HUMANIST APPROACH

Humanism gives an honest and secure base for each person's values and ideals, and for the extension of our concerns from ourselves, to our community, nation and the world. Humanism accepts a common responsibility of all people for all people, for the present and for the future.

Humanists have faith in the power of human reason and creativity, balanced by sympathy and insight. But it does take effort and time to change attitudes. Humanists are inspired by the amount of understanding that has been achieved, in science, history, philosophy, literature, the arts, morality – but also we appreciate that we have very much further to go. This awareness that our understanding is incomplete means that we must be careful in our thinking and in our actions. But, however incomplete, we must use all our present understanding to the full.

Humanists' recognition of the human source of human knowledge distinguishes us from the religious: Humanists recognise no revelation, and no divine guidance or support. We do not follow Ideological Marxists in their belief in determinism by the modes of production, and their consequent stress on revolution. We also reject incitement to hatred as a weapon between classes or races; and the very different destructiveness of selfish consumerism. The lives of many people are damaged, directly or indirectly, by the unbalanced views of life and death, and of human powers, imposed by these attitudes. Although human beings share a common humanity, their potential is easily distorted by their upbringing.

The beliefs and commitments of Humanism are not asserted dogmatically, for we know they are not complete and final answers. They express the best understanding we have achieved so far.

A NATURALISTIC UNIVERSE

Humanists accept that everything in the Universe is the result of naturalistic processes.

All living things, from the simplest organism to human beings with their manifold qualities, are the outcome of naturalistic evolution – random variation and natural selection.

The description "naturalistic" by no means contradicts the reality of morals, nor the vital influence of purpose and design. It claims that purpose and design come only from human beings and, if to a rudimentary degree, some higher animals. If it is true that the Universe is naturalistic in every way, then "God" makes no difference, and belief in "Him" is unreasonable.

The roots of morality lie in human nature and in the quality of human fulfilment. These are differently interpreted in different life stances. A God-based life stance is called a religion; Humanism is a naturalistic life stance.

HUMANIST VALUES

The responsibilities of Humanism are positive and exacting commitments. People do not become Humanists merely by rejecting supernatural beliefs.

For the Humanist, the central things that are best in humanity are our concern to help each other, and our many abilities that make this possible. Our capacities to understand, to imagine, to create, to sympathise, and to find enjoyment in the enjoyment of others, are central to our concerns and actions. Life is meaningful because people create a web of meaning here and now, by giving real help and mutual support, and by deriving satisfaction and fulfilment from so doing. All this is the key to morality.

For Humanists, happiness is good in itself, in so far as it reflects what is best in human nature. Walking in the mountains, listening to one's favourite music . . . are good, in the pleasure and recreation they give. But reading a story to a child, or – on a different plane – working to relieve world famine, extends action outward to other people and to the future, and will give a greater depth of expression and value to our experience. Ideally, life should be a balance of both kinds of enjoyment.

The job of Humanism is to give a vision to inspire people, and guidelines from which moral judgements can be built. This vision is of a world where each person's life is shaped by human warmth as well as by imagination and reason.

THE OPEN SOCIETY

If right and wrong are not given by God it is up to us to work out what is best, and to influence society accordingly. Humanists accept this responsibility.

The values that prevail in our society come from individuals, organisations and the media. Organisations can be powerful, and the influence of an individual is magnified if he supports an organisation –the more so if the organisation is recognised by the media. This is how Christians enhance their influence.

How can contradictory values and ambitions be resolved? Humanists argue that the ideals of co-operation and tolerance, and the use of constitutional process and reasoned persuasion not force, can win through in all but entrenched totalitarian regimes. We call the best framework for this the *Open Society.*

Even in Britain, there is need for change and improvement – less secrecy, wider participation, more reasoned argument and a longer term view. But the more important changes concern values and ideals. Government and governed alike should show a greater sense of responsibility.

OPENNESS

The Open Society must be recognised as a distinctively Humanist ideal. Though it is the logical outcome of the western liberal tradition, it comes from the secular Greek contribution, not the Judaeo-Christian. It is incompatible with the religious assumption of divine authority; Ideological Marxism views it with contempt.

The aspect of the Open Society which religions find most difficult is the principle of open-mindedness: there should be no bias where there is no sufficiently clear knowledge of the truth. This applies in particular to the different life stances, religious and naturalistic, for these contradict each other on ultimate questions of human nature and purpose. Thus institutions which carry authority (such as schools, the media, the law) have a responsibility not to support one life stance to the prejudice of others.

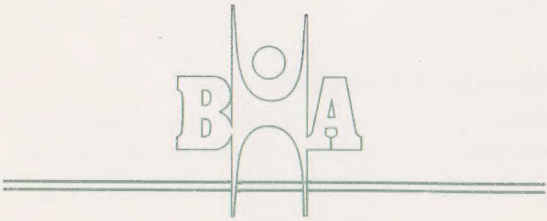
The religious rejection of openness is particularly clear in Religious Education. Too many Christians in positions of power reject the ideals of objectivity, fairness and balance in RE, and instead impose a specifically religious view of ultimate questions. Thus the teaching is too narrow and lacks integrity. In particular the needs of non-religious children are seriously neglected.

HUMANIST RESPONSIBILITIES

The Open Society requires not only "openness". Ideals and standards must actually flourish. In fact "openness" is a source of difficulty.

If no one life stance has official status, each most take responsibility for the maintenance of ideals. Humanism has a prime responsibility, as the champion of the Open Society, and as the principal non-religious stance within it.

There is work to be done. The quality of life in a society depends on the values which actually prevail in it. It will only be worth living in if these are such that individuals will find worthwhile fulfilment. Selfish consumerism, prejudice, exploitation and even hatred, are widespread, and must be countered; positive forces must be fostered. The basic values of social morality and democracy are clear, and therefore can and should be securely established. In all this, Humanists are working in parallel with those from other life stances.

But there are many practical matters where different life stances do not agree. Thus Humanists have a double responsibility and challenge – to be strong in our support of shared values, but to proclaim and contend for Humanist values in those critical areas where the Humanist and religious conceptions of human nature and responsibilities differ.

If the thoughts expressed here appeal to you, you are probably a Humanist. Come and join us in the jobs that Humanists must do – to work for the Open Society, and to influence the prevailing values. The good, open society will only emerge if Humanists join together to establish an effective Humanist presence which can make a significant impact on society.